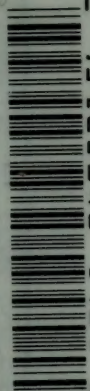


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THE ANNUNCIATION
II REPRESENTATIONS BY ARTISTS
OF THE XIV-XVI CENTURIES
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY G. F. HILL

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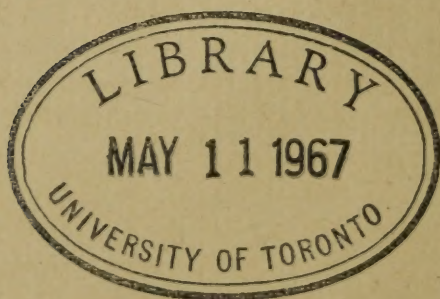


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THE ANNUNCIATION
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INTRODUCTION

TWO things distinguish the Annunciation as the subject of art from other episodes of Gospel history. In the first place it is the expression of the most vital of Christian dogmas, and that means that the opportunities for the play of fancy about it are severely limited. That the limits thus imposed are occasionally strained, not to say altogether broken, makes it all the more conspicuous how the ordinary artist was careful to respect them. You do not find the subject regarded, as a matter of course, as suitable for picturesque treatment; monkeys and camels and hunting leopards may be appropriate elements in a picture of the Adoration of the Magi; but that a cat should be scared by the sudden appearance of the Archangel Gabriel (Plate 12), however admirable as showing the artist's power of observation in the domain of psychical research, is felt by most of us to be nothing less than an outrage on religious feeling. Consciousness of this truth has prompted the explanation that the cat here represents the

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Devil, whose power is broken by Gabriel's salutation. If, however, we analyse the total effect of the picture, we shall probably find that what offends us most is not the cat, but the grotesquely theatrical behaviour of the Virgin, the Archangel, and the Almighty Himself. The cat, we feel, was not without justification for his disgust. The general principle, however, is unaffected by this analysis, since it remains true that any deviation from absolute sincerity and directness in the rendering of such a subject is apt to remove the whole picture at one stroke out of the sphere of religious painting. In contact with such a subject, emotion is so delicately balanced that the least touch sends it flying who knows whither? Sometimes the mediaeval passion for symbolical treatment seizes upon the subject, and then, since the treatment is removed altogether from reality, and no one is expected to believe that the thing ever happened like that, there is no longer cause for offence. So, as Mrs. Jameson and other writers on the subject have remarked, we find the story of the Annunciation 'contaminated,' to use the convenient phrase of mythologists, with the moral 'example' of Innocence. The Virgin, supreme example of chastity, is represented as the Maiden whose purity is such that by exposing herself she, and she alone, can tame the wild unicorn. As early as the thirteenth century we

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find this allegory thus employed on an embroidery; the Virgin sits with the unicorn, who has laid its head in her lap, and in this mystery is identified with Christ; an angel, holding in leash three hounds, whose names are given as Charity, Truth, and Humility, blows upon a horn; in the middle of the composition is a fountain, on the edge of which stands the Holy Dove. This allegory was especially popular in Germany and France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The second distinctive feature of the Annunciation is found in its being the culminating point in the life of the Virgin. It is the moment of her greatest glory, when she becomes the Mother of God; the Assumption and the Coronation take quite secondary places, being, like the Immaculate Conception, the fruit of after thought. Accordingly the representation of the Annunciation, fostered as it was by the cardinal importance of the dogma which it embodies, was immensely helped by the ever-increasing dominance of the worship of the Virgin. Thus it came by the thirteenth century to be a necessary element in the decoration of almost every altar; if it was not the main picture, then it was painted on the shutters, or in a lunette above, or the two essential figures formed some part of the sculptured decoration of the altar or at the entrance to the choir.

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We have seen that a multiplicity of picturesque detail was foreign to the tradition of the subject. Such as was allowed was based chiefly on the apocryphal gospel known as the Proto-evangel of James. Mary went out one day to the well with a pitcher to fetch water. At the well she heard a voice saying, 'Hail thou, full of grace; the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women.' She returned, troubled in spirit, to the house, set down the pitcher and began to spin the purple wool which the priest of the Temple had given to her to spin. And lo! the Angel of the Lord stood before her and said, 'Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God.' The rest follows as in the Gospel. This curious splitting of the story into two parts was comparatively seldom adopted. The most famous representation of the scene at the well is in a mosaic in St. Mark's; and after the twelfth century the subject disappears from art. The spinning-motive was more frequent; it is possible that the significance of the distaff, as the emblem of the chaste housewife, may have had something to do with its popularity.

A detail, certainly not vouched for by any ancient writer, and by some authorities condemned as heretical, is sometimes seen in the infant Christ, who is shown as proceeding on the rays which descend from the Almighty to the

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Virgin. This is not uncommon in Italian paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is probably a mistake to say, with the excellent Mrs. Jameson, that this represents in fact not the Annunciation but the Incarnation. That, to the untheological spectator, is a distinction without a difference; the introduction of the detail is merely due to the artist's desire to make his meaning plain to the most materialistic intelligence; and that was doubtless enough to brand it as heretical.

A good deal has been written about the distinction between two aspects of the Annunciation, as a mystery and as an historical event. We are told that, where the subject is represented with abstraction of all subsidiary matters, only the Virgin and the Archangel being shown, with just so much action as is necessary to bring them into relation with each other, there we have the subject regarded as a divine mystery. The other aspect is rendered in a narrative fashion. The distinction can be pressed too far. The rendering of the subject on the porch of Amiens would on this hypothesis be a rendering of the mystery; but it is clearly conditioned by the architecture, which requires single detached figures; and the Visitation, a purely historical subject, is treated in exactly the same manner. It is clear too that, although the seated position which is usually

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given to the Virgin may be meant to indicate that she is superior in dignity to Gabriel, there were occasions, like that at Amiens already mentioned, on which it was impossible for an artist to give utterance to his orthodoxy in this particular way. In deciding, therefore, which aspect is envisaged by the artist, one ought to consider first how far the conditions of place and time allowed him a free hand. The earliest rendering of the subject is that which is found in a fresco in the catacomb of Priscilla, dating from the end of the second century ; an almost exactly similar representation occurs, about half a century later, in SS. Peter and Marcellinus. Mary is seated ; the angel, clad like an ordinary saint, stands before her and addresses her, raising his right hand. So simple is the scheme, that it was long doubted whether it really represented the Annunciation. But now that this fact is admitted, it would be absurd to suppose that its simplicity is due to the desire to represent the mystery rather than the event, and not merely to the fact that Christian art was still at a very primitive stage of development.

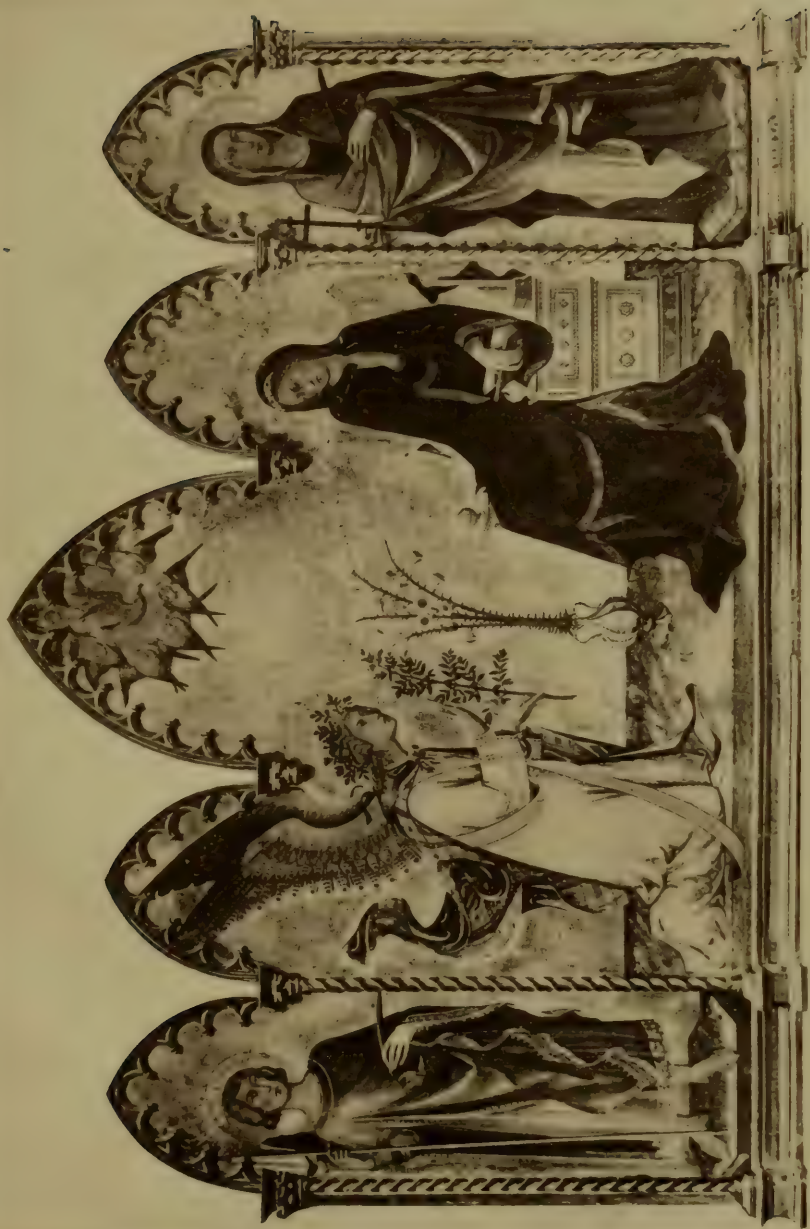
PLATES

1. Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi. Florence, Uffizi.
2. Donatello. Santa Croce, Florence.
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11. Mariotto Albertinelli. Volterra Cathedral.
12. Lorenzo Lotto. Recanati.

I. SIMONE MARTINI and LIPPO MEMMI.

Florence, Uffizi, 23.

This picture was painted in 1333 for the Cathedral of Siena. The Virgin holds half closed the book which she was reading (according to one of the apocryphal versions of the story). The delightful angel wears a wreath of olive and carries a branch of the same tree, for the lily which he usually bears is in the pot on the floor. The words of the angelic salutation (hardly visible in a reproduction) proceed from his lips to the ear of the Virgin. The central scene is flanked by two saints; on the left, Ansano, with banner and palm; on the right, Julitta, with cross and palm.



2. DONATELLO. Santa Croce, Florence.

The Tabernacle of the Annunciation, in grey Florentine stone, which dates from shortly before 1433, was regarded by Vasari as an early work of the master, probably because its unalloyed grace and charm seemed to him more in keeping with an early than with a mature stage in Donatello's development. As a composition, it has the serene simplicity of an Attic grave-relief; but the Renaissance mood is expressed in the riot of architectural decoration. It remains withal full of a quite simple religious feeling, and altogether it is one of those works of Donatello to which one's thoughts gladly turn when some of his more forceful attempts to express the beauty of ugliness seem to demand too strenuous an intellectual effort for their appreciation.



3. FILIPPO LIPPI. National Gallery, No. 666.

Gabriel kneels on a bed of flowers just outside the Virgin's chamber, where she has been reading. The hand of the Almighty above emits a ray of light, along which the Dove proceeds. A stone vase containing a lily rests on a base which bears the Medici device of a diamond ring. The panel was, in fact, painted for Cosimode' Medici, and was formerly in the Riccardi Palace at Florence. It belongs to an early period in Lippi's career (about 1437-1440).



4. **BENEDETTO BONFIGLI.** Communal Gallery, Perugia.

This is probably a fairly early work of Bonfigli, who is first mentioned in 1445. It has the painter's characteristic brightness and cheerfulness of colour and tone. St. Luke sits in the middle of the picture, writing, with his ox lying beside him. This disturbing feature was doubtless insisted upon by the person or community who commissioned the painting.



5. PIERO DEI FRANCESCHI. S. Francesco,
Arezzo.

The series of frescoes by Piero dei Franceschi in the choir of S. Francesco was finished by the end of 1466. The Annunciation is characteristic of his love of large clear spaces and solemn stately figures; and he has carried the plan of dividing his composition into squares by horizontal and vertical architectural lines almost so far as to endanger the unity of the subject.



6. LEONARDO DA VINCI(?). Florence,
Uffizi, 1288.

This charming but much-disputed picture (the claims appear to be divided between Leonardo, Lorenzo di Credi, and Ridolfo Ghirlandajo) was originally at the convent of Monte Oliveto near Florence. Certain features which seem foreign to Leonardo as we know him—such as the very careful representation of an antique which forms the base of the Virgin's reading desk, and generally the great precision of the architectural detail—may be accounted for by its being a youthful work. It may have been painted in Verrocchio's workshop about 1471 or 1472; in the former year Leonardo was actually employed on bronze work for the convent of Monte Oliveto.



7. ANDREA DELLA ROBBIA. La Verna,
Chiesa maggiore.

Relief in glazed terracotta, inscribed ECCIE
(sic) A(n)CILLA DO(min)I FIAT MIHI SE-
CV(n)DVM VERBVM TVV(m) (Luke, i, 38).
Andrea, who was born in 1435, was working at
La Verna about 1479. A graceful pot of lilies
stands between the Virgin and the angel, who
kneels in adoration; behind and above him, in
a cloud of cherubs, is God the Father in the atti-
tude of blessing. Charming as it is, the composi-
tion is rendered restless by the characteristic
breaking up of the background with indiffer-
ently successful clouds.



ECCE ACILLADO IFIAT MIHI SE CVDV3 VERBV IV

8. CARLO CRIVELLI. National Gallery, No.
739.

Only the lower portion of this charming Annunciation is reproduced. It is signed by the artist, and dated 1486, having been painted for the church of the Santissima Annunziata at Ascoli. Accordingly, St. Emidius, the patron saint of Ascoli, accompanies the archangel, holding in his hands a model of his city. They approach the window of the house, in which the Virgin kneels before her reading-desk. The Dove descends to her on a ray of light which enters through a small semicircular window (not shown here) most conveniently placed for it. A little child at the top of steps on the left looks on, and a man in the middle distance seems also to be aware of the event. All the delightful details are rendered with an artless sincerity that is quite captivating.



9. BOTTICELLI. Florence, Uffizi, No. 1316.

This picture was painted for the convent of S. Maria Maddalena di Cestello (now S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi). As the altar of the chapel for which it was painted was consecrated on 26 June 1490, the picture doubtless dates from that year. Long lost, the painting was discovered in 1872 in a chapel formerly belonging to the nuns of S. Maria Maddalena. In spite of the fact that the Botticellian mannerisms are more marked than usual (as in the contortion of the shrinking figure of the Virgin), this is not surpassed in depth of religious feeling by any other picture of the master's.



ANNO DOMINI MCCCCLXXII
 APRILIS VIGINTI QUARTO



FE. ANCHLA DOMINICA
 NICHSEORIANVERBATA

10. FLORENTINE ENGRAVING. British
Museum, B I 1.

This is one of a series of engravings of the life of the Virgin and Christ, for the design of which Alessio Baldovinetti is now generally supposed to be responsible. The scheme of the present subject approaches closely to two pictures by or attributed to Botticelli, one of which is reproduced in Plate 9.



II. MARIOTTO ALBERTINELLI. Volterra
Cathedral.

This picture, painted in 1497, is the earliest known dated work of Albertinelli (he was born in 1474). Six years earlier than the famous Visitation, it shows the same classic purity of style, although neither angel nor Virgin has the intellectual force of the two figures in the later picture.



12. LORENZO LOTTO. Santa Maria sopra
Mercanti, Recanati.

In a delightful interior, the Virgin kneels, with hands raised in astonishment, staring out of the picture at the spectator; the angel, who has approached from the right, kneels on one knee, raising his right hand in a stagey gesture, and a startled cat scurries across the floor. A theatrical God the Father leans from heaven and points towards the Virgin. The picture is signed. Mr. Berenson dates it about 1527-8. It is a good instance of Lotto's brilliant execution and (regarded as religious painting) ineptitude of conception.





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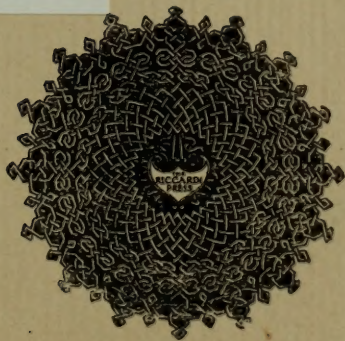
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